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SUBJECT: PM MALIKI DISCUSSES DE-BA'ATHIFICATION, IRANIAN
DETAINEES, AND POLITICAL PROGRESS WITH CODEL HAGEL

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Summary: Prime Minister Maliki stated that political progress is slow, but does exist, in an April 15 meeting with Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) and Representative Joe Sestak (D-PA). The Prime Minister (PM) expressed pessimism that the de-Ba'athification legislation would have much impact, and expressed concern that the U.S. domestic debate in Congress was being interpreted as a sign of weakness by those who wished harm to Iraq. The PM also conveyed that the Iranians viewed release of the five detainees as a precondition to attending the Expanded Neighbors' Conference. End Summary.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT

¶2. (C) Senator Hagel opened the discussion by asking if the Prime Minister could share his current assessment of the political situation. The Prime Minister said that the security crisis is the basis for the political crisis, and that "the political crisis is multi-dimensional." The political crisis then opens the door for regional differences to interfere in Iraq. "We have here the struggle by proxy of those who represent foreign powers," he said. Political progress does exist, stated Maliki, and cited as example the hydrocarbon law, which is in final language and will be presented to the Council of Representatives (CoR) in the near future.

¶3. (C) Maliki stated that the Government of Iraq (GOI) believes that national reconciliation must continue, and that in this respect, it is important that political decisions be above military decisions. However, he asserted the coalition forces were inciting political crises by not allowing the political process to run its course. As an example, he stated that the decision to withdraw from Basrah was a unilateral military decision that had political ramifications.

DE-BA'ATHIFICATION

¶4. (C) Addressing the issue of de-Ba'athification, Maliki stated that "we cannot trust the Ba'ath party at all," and "it is rare to find anyone in the Ba'ath party who did not commit a crime." That party is "always stirring up conspiracies and has a history of coups." The Prime Minister stated that the draft law had been submitted to the CoR, and "we have done our part, but it will not be fruitful." Because higher Ba'ath leadership has been exiled or eliminated, he did not feel that the de-Ba'ath law will yield

much positive result. He added that the decision to dissolve the Saddam army was a correct step, because it "was a Ba'athist, conspiratorial army."

SECURITY

15. (C) Senator Hagel asked the Prime Minister for his views on security. Maliki offered a sober assessment that suicide operations "will be reduced, but will never end." Some politicians in the CoR support the resistance, which gives a contradictory message, he complained. "They oppose the political situation while they are partners in it," he said, but "lately they realize that the government is stronger than they thought."

IRANIAN DETAINEES

16. (S) On the Expanded Neighbors' Conference (ENC), Maliki stated that it will help security and cooperation with neighboring states. The detention of five Iranians in Irbil has created an additional problem, he asserted, as Iran has stated it will not participate unless they are released. Senator Hagel pressed for clarification, asking "is your point that the United States should release the five Iranians and that will smooth participation of the Iranians?" The Prime Minister said that he only used that "as an example." In fact, meetings between the US and Iranian foreign ministers "would get rid of many issues," he noted. "The release of the detainees is necessary, and will reduce problems," he added, "but will not eliminate all the friction."

17. (S) The Prime Minister stated that if Iran comes to the two conferences (the International Compact for Iraq and the Expanded Neighbors' Conference), it will be committed to resolutions. In comparison, five people do not mean much, especially because these five were "focused on the Kurds, a semi-independent state." Maliki said he would talk to President Talibani on this issue.

MOOD IN THE U.S. CONGRESS

18. (C) Prime Minister Maliki asked about the mood of Congress, and warned that Congressional pressure on President Bush "may make us face a situation we never considered: withdrawal before completion of the building of our armed forces." Senator Hagel stated that this was our fifth year at a very high cost to America. There was no point in going back and debating why we are here, he said, but that the recent votes on the \$100 billion FY07 Emergency Supplemental Appropriation reflected the current mood of the U.S. people, who are very frustrated. "I do not think there is a strong feeling to abandon Iraq, I don't believe that will happen," said the Senator. "But Congress will now set some conditions for our future involvement," he cautioned, "and a continued military escalation in Iraq will not be supported by the American people."

19. (C) The Senator clarified that "this means the Iraqi army will have to be in a position to carry more of the burden, and the political leaders will have to be in a position to achieve reconciliation." Congressman Sestak said that "all in Congress have the same objective of a free and stable Iraq, but that the difference is in how to achieve that goal, and at what cost to U.S. strategic interests worldwide."

110. (C) The Prime Minister expressed concern that "this disagreement in Congress impacts us a lot, because other states who want to intervene see this as weakness and are encouraged, especially if the Iraqi army is not ready." "We will never go back to a central government, even if dictatorship is the price of security," emphasized Maliki.

Senator Hagel noted that Representative Sestak had made a very important point: that there is very little difference in the U.S. about the objective in Iraq, only in how to achieve the objective. "There is no interest to go back to a dictatorship," reassured the Senator.

ARMING THE IRAQI ARMY

¶11. (C) Prime Minister Maliki stated that Iraq desires a long-term relationship with America, and understands that "it is our responsibility to defend our country and ease the current burden that falls on the coalition shoulders. "Allow us to bear the responsibility and the U.S. can reduce its presence," he stated. Maliki then complained "why this delay in creating real Iraqi forces to bear this responsibility?" "The terrorists have better weapons than are used by our police," he said. Congressman Sestak said that after all the good work on training, the U.S. Army has designated this to be the year of logistics, and M4s and M16s are beginning to flow.

¶12. (C) The Prime Minister closed by saying "we are developing rather than retreating in Iraq - we are gaining the confidence of our citizens, sectarian killings are almost over, and the government is stable." "Political progress is slow, but it does exist," he emphasized. The Senator said that "we will continue to help and support in every way, we are friends and allies."

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